
WARNING!

The views expressed in FMSO publications and reports are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

MOUT in Iraq: Population Dependent?

by Mr. Timothy L. Thomas, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

Combat in cities has never been a good idea. Sun Tsu noted long ago “the worst strategy in war—attack walled cities.” Yet if combat erupts in Iraq, coalition forces may have no option but to fight in cities. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein witnessed the destruction of his force at the hands of an outnumbered coalition force during Desert Storm, and he appears to have learned from his armed forces’ mistake of taking on a high tech force in open terrain. Of course, Hussein is often unpredictable because he is blinded by his own propaganda. Writing about the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian author Hoseyn Ardestani noted about Hussein’s decision-making:

In view of his absolute confidence in the information and analysis he had received about the situation in Iran, the “strategy of pure victory” guided that regime’s decisions. It was assumed that it would be impossible to lose this game....Iraq’s regime, in its decision to make a military attack, used “non-strategic rationality.” It mistakenly considered the environmental circumstances at the national, regional and international levels to be suitable for military measures. Just as in the attack on Kuwait in the year 1990 Saddam Hussein’s perception of international military developments was mistaken. [\[1\]](#)

Another sign of Hussein’s delusion is the Mosque of Saddam the Great, and the Mosque of the Mother of All Battles, the latter dedicated to the Gulf War “victory” in Hussein’s eyes. The Mother of All Battles Mosque has minarets resembling Kalashnikov rifles and Scud missiles. [\[2\]](#) Thus it will be hard to know whether Hussein will attempt to attack US or coalition forces before these forces reach the sanctuary—or death trap—of a city due to the unpredictability of his rationale for action, and the absolute confidence he puts in the information those around him provide (information, most likely, attuned and filtered to Hussein’s liking).

Opinions on the feasibility of conducting an attack on Baghdad vary widely. Some believe the Iraqis will fight to the last man, while others believe they would welcome the arrival of a coalition force with open arms and massive defections. Reporters interviewing Iraqi locals generally fall into the first category, while several US generals, Iraqi defectors, and some reporters fall into the second category.

New York Times reporter Nicholas D. Kristof believes it would be foolish to attack Baghdad. From his discussions with “scores of ordinary people from Mosul in the north to Basra in the south” he reached two conclusions: that Iraqis dislike and distrust Saddam Hussein, and that Iraqis hate the US government even more, and are more distrustful of America’s intentions than Saddam’s. While finding few people willing to fight for Saddam, he found plenty of nationalists

willing to defend Iraq against “Yankee invaders” enraged at the US after 11 years of economic sanctions. [\[3\]](#)

One Iraqi official told Kristof that “some day, they will have to come to ground. And then we’ll be waiting. Every Iraqi has a gun in his house, often a Kalashnikov. And every Iraqi has experience in fighting. So let’s see how the Americans do when they’re fighting in our streets.” Baghdad, inhabited by thousands of civilians and regular troops, artillery, tanks, and potentially chemical and biological weapons, is not Mogadishu. Kristof also reported that some young militia members had just finished a training session in street fighting. [\[4\]](#) One is reminded of the thoughts of Ilias Akhmadov, a Chechen fighter, who observed that under conditions of national survival, a civilian could be turned into a professional in only a few days of city fighting.

Scott Peterson, a staff writer for the *Christian Science Monitor*, painted an equally bleak picture. He quoted Iraqi officials as wanting to create a “new Vietnam” for American forces by drawing them into cities. “Let our streets be our jungles; let our buildings be our swamps,” he reported them as saying. Peterson also cited “experts familiar with high-level Iraqi thinking” (apparently Westerners) as saying that Iraqi urban bases have been garrisoned, command and control decentralized, trusted officers put in charge of each urban area, weapons stockpiled, ten new radio transmitters put in operation to “keep communications fluid” and plans made to call for a declaration of martial law to put troops on the streets as soon as possible when the bombing starts. Peterson adds that Iraqi civil servants have handed out weapons to ‘loyalists’ and asked them to put their hands on a Koran or Bible (?) and pledge to kill the enemy if they see one. [\[5\]](#) Retired US General John Hoar, while testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in late September, noted that his nightmare scenario is a dozen Iraqi divisions lined up to defend Baghdad, reinforced with several thousand antiaircraft artillery pieces. This is precisely the scenario one expects from the force composition of the Iraqi army.

Washington Post Foreign Service reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran reported that there were no visible military buildups on Baghdad’s streets in September 2002, when talk of action against Iraq was increasing in Washington. Western military analysts believe there are at least three divisions of the Republican Guard (which has been specially trained for urban warfare according to diplomats and military analysts, Chandrasekaran reports) in and around the capital. Each division has between 8-10,000 soldiers. If this is true, then to gain an advantage for an attack, according to the old Soviet standards of correlation of forces, an attacking force would have to be in the neighborhood of 150,000 soldiers just to confront the Republican Guard with a 5:1 advantage. The main Iraqi opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress, reported that Hussein has centralized command of the Guard and ordered new fortifications built around Baghdad. Iraqi officials only state that troops are ready. [\[6\]](#) Most important, US authorities must consider that this time, Iraqi troops will be fighting for their own territory and not over Kuwait’s territory. This should strengthen the Iraqi will to resist.

By contrast, there are those who believe city fighting in Baghdad would be brief and probably bloody but successful for the US and its allies. Andrew Krepinevich, who heads the Center for Strategic and Budget Assessments in Washington, says the morale of the Iraqi armed forces is questionable, and that the scenario that unfolds may be soldiers trying to ditch their uniforms for civilian clothes instead of defending Baghdad. He believes many US generals think that by

moving fast enough and generating a type of snowball effect, the momentum for collapse can be exploited and cities won't turn into killing zones. Sean Boyne, an Iraqi expert based in Ireland, believes Saddam is not confident in the loyalty of ordinary conscripts, forcing Republican Guard units to ring Baghdad and play a watchdog role over ordinary armed forces. [\[7\]](#)

Retired Air Force LTG Thomas McInerney told the same Senate Hearing at which General Hoar testified that "Most of the army does not want to fight for Saddam. We are already seeing increasing desertions from the regular army as well as the Republican Guards," citing reports from inside Iraq. "That's why I think there will not be urban fighting." Arab scholar Fouad Ajami of Johns Hopkins University predicted that "we shall be greeted, I think, in Baghdad and Basra with kites and boom boxes." [\[8\]](#) Colonel Barry Ford of the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab noted that the biggest US advantage in cities will come from technology. Marines will know where all their buddies are, and they will be able to call on heavy tanks to provide protective firepower. "The tank may be the preeminent weapons system for use in urban terrain, along with the bulldozer," he notes. [\[9\]](#) Randy Gangle, executive director of the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, a US Marine Corps think-tank, supports Ford's notion. If the M1A2 is almost invulnerable in an urban setting, then "infantry going alone into an urban battle is tantamount to suicide." [\[10\]](#)

Christopher Cooper, staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, noted that the Pentagon is betting most of Saddam's army won't put up much of a fight. US ground troops, supported by air strikes, will travel almost unchallenged to Baghdad's outskirts, according to his version of a Pentagon scenario. Cooper notes that Iraq's conscript army will surrender en masse, and that the lightly armed militia troops called the "Jerusalem Army" will be even less of a threat. Further, Cooper notes that Pentagon officials believe ties between Hussein and his Republican Guard have weakened due to economic sanctions and repeated political purges. A mixture of psychological operations and US firepower will break the bond completely. PSYOP may work well on the Republican Guard, but have less of an effect on the 20,000 strong Special Republican Guard, the 10,000 strong Special Security Service, and the force known as Saddam Fedayeen, all located in Baghdad and run by Saddam Hussein's sons. [\[11\]](#)

Two recent articles further highlight the disparity of views regarding whether the Iraqis will fight or not. Pentagon thinking is probably buttressed by the thoughts of several exiled Iraqi army officers. For example, former Brigadier General Saad Al-Obeidi, who says he directed Iraqi psychological operations in the Iraqi army, believes the Iraqi army will defect in large numbers once serious fighting begins. On the other hand, Mohammed Mehdi Saleh, a senior member of Hussein's cabinet, offered an opposing point of view. He said Iraqi forces will concentrate its forces in cities. "If they want to change the political system in Iraq, they have to come to Baghdad. We will be waiting for them here." [\[12\]](#) Exile groups insist that Iraqi groups are continually trying to contact them as tensions rise. This includes, according to Iraqi National Congress officials in London, very senior people in circles around Saddam. Others believe the INC to have little influence inside Iraq. [\[13\]](#) And so goes the battle for public opinion.

Clearly, the opinions of whether there will or will not be fighting in cities, and how difficult it will be, are varied. The opinion of Colonel Ford, for example, seems influenced by the experience of the Israelis in Jenin, where the Palestinians employed booby traps and rock

throwers against the Israeli use of tanks, helicopters, and bulldozers in an area 600 yards by 600 yards. This experience is a far cry from that of the Chechens versus the Russians in Grozny, Chechnya, where a lightly armed Chechen force (with RPGs, and some artillery and tanks) confronted the Russian armed forces. In the latter case, the Russians did not dare send tanks into the city, spread out over some 90 square miles, without heavy escort. Iraq's armed forces are much more heavily armed than the Chechens, indicating that tanks may have a role but will also be constrained in ways not imaginable in cities such as Mogadishu and Kabul. The cardinal difference is that Chechnya itself is not a key natural oil resource as is Iraq. The latter is a special case in that it controls a huge percentage of the world's oil supply, and is home to serious internal contradictions among its religious and ethnic components. These differences could set in motion internal conflict or civil war in Iraq after Hussein is removed from power. The US will have to be very careful in how it uses Hussein's opponents, and in how power is divided when/if Hussein is removed.

Baghdad is well beyond the scale of Jenin, Mogadishu, Kabul, and Grozny in area and population. The historical significance of the city and its environs for Islamic and world history is huge. The question of transition from regular warfare to guerilla warfare, and the role of the urban environment in that transition is critical for both US and Iraqi forces. Baghdad is the administrative, economic, and cultural center of Iraq with a peacetime population of five million. It is a stronghold of the Baath Socialist Party, whose followers know that Saddam's departure is likely to mean bloody reprisals against them. But it is also a multi-ethnic city. Baghdad, like Iraq, is demographically young with over 40% of the population under 14 years of age. Saddam City [also known as Al-Thawra city], a densely-populated, working-class suburb of Baghdad that is home to 1.5 million, is the place likeliest to stage a revolt: it is an entirely Shia Muslim community and makes up 30% of the capital's population. Its youth are not likely to sit out the conflict. However, given the fate of the Shia revolt after the Gulf War (the US did not support the revolt as many Shia members expected, resulting in strong reprisals from Hussein), there is little likelihood that the Shia rebels will view US forces as liberators. Iran and Iraq have been engaged in quasi-covert support of rebels in each other's country, and so it should be expected that Iranian-supported Shia will take the opportunity of collapse, if it emerges, to exercise the opportunity to revolt against a Sunni-Baath dominated Iraq. The assassination of the Grand Ayatollah Al-Sadr and two of his sons in the Shiite center of Al-Najaf in February 1999 set off mass demonstrations by Iraqi Shiites against the Baghdad government and led to the death of 27 protestors and the arrest of another 250 in Saddam City. The Iranian supported Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) maintains a network of agents within the suburb. [\[14\]](#) Thus, the importance of understanding the ethnic-religious implications of fighting in Baghdad cannot be overestimated.

On 20 October it was reported that President Bush had authorized training for as many as 5,000 Iraqi opponents of Saddam Hussein in a National Security Presidential Directive of 3 October. The story did not make clear what opposition the US intended to support – Kurdish, Sunni, or Shia. The Iraqis would be trained in basic combat skills, as well as to serve as battlefield advisers, scouts, and interpreters with US ground troops. Eventually the number could grow to 10,000. This appears to be a wise move. Again, referring back to the fighting in the Russian republic of Chechnya in 1999, the Russians were greatly assisted in their successful assault on the city of Grozny by the addition of native Chechens who served as advisers/interpreters. The

Iraqis in opposition to Hussein could assist US forces in a similar manner. One caveat to this thought: the opposition may be united in opposing Saddam but could fall out over ethnic/religious divisions as victory over Saddam appears imminent. In that case Baghdad could become a battleground among competing Iraqi factions with US/coalition forces in the middle of the fight. [\[15\]](#) Selection of Iraqi dissidents/defectors must be done with great care and in consideration of the desired political endstate.

A former communist guerilla predicted that one of Hussein's options is to conduct his city battle much as the Chechens did against the Russians. This would mean the use of snipers in many buildings, and perhaps even breaking the Republican Guard into small four and five man mobile squads with the mission of harassing attacking coalition forces—appearing to be everywhere without being seen. It is possible that, based on the reaction of the Pentagon to events in Somalia, Hussein could be under the impression that the creation of a real show for CNN would benefit his cause—dragging dead bodies through the streets, staging attacks on mosques, and so on. [\[16\]](#) Baghdad, however, is not the only city in Iraq that could be of operational concern. Any force moving from Kuwait to Baghdad will encounter some 20 major population centers enroute. [\[17\]](#)

There was little note, apparently, taken of Iraqi techniques for city fighting during the Iran-Iraq war, as no more than a few paragraphs could be found in the unclassified realm in US sources. In the first year of the war, the Iraqi Army attacked Iranian cities such as Khorramshahr with armored forces without dismounted infantry. These forces were repeatedly destroyed at short distances by antitank weapons and homemade explosives. The Iraqis soon discovered that fighting in built-up areas deprived armor of its advantages of mobility and firepower. The Iraqis also discovered that massing of artillery fires against the city was largely ineffective due to the cover that the buildings provided the enemy. The Iraqis were completely bogged down in Khorramshahr and had to bring in a Special Forces brigade to fight its way through the city to assist the stranded Iraqi units. Iraq virtually halted all offensive operations for three weeks to give special MOUT training to units before finally taking the city. Even then it took a total of 15 days and some 5000 casualties to secure the city. Iraqi losses in the city of Khorramshahr were so great they renamed it "Khunishar, The City of Blood." [\[18\]](#)

A review of Iranian literature during the Iran-Iraq shows little focus by historians on urban operations even though some important battles were conducted. In the Iranian work of Ardestani mentioned earlier, he noted that Hussein's forces met with real problems when it encountered cities. The occupation of the Iranian city of Khorramshahr took 35 days alone, and became a model for the Iranians of how to defeat Hussein's strategy of quick victory. Hussein attacked cities with missiles and aerial bombardments, slaughtered children, old men and women, and plundered when possible, according to Ardestani's account. Weaknesses in the Iraqi defensive lines included relinquishing flanks, exposing areas behind the front lines, too much distance between the front lines and the back lines, low morale among Iraqi soldiers for being on Iranian territory, and a shortage of defensive forces [as translated by FBIS]. When Iraq's back was up against the wall, it did four things: used chemical weapons, increased attacks on oil ships, attacked Khark Island to disrupt oil exports from Iran, and intensified the missile-air war on cities which had increased significantly in importance. The goal was to disrupt economic activities and national morale, and if possible to provoke the people to rise against the regime. During the battle for the city of Fav, Iranian divers crossed the Arvand River and fooled the Iraqi

army as to the exact place of attack. The Iraqis left the city and took up defensive positions behind a salt factory north of the city. [\[19\]](#) This was the extent of Ardestani's account of city fighting.

One Israeli Journal offered a more detailed article on Iraq's participation in the Battle of Khorramshahr in the spring of 2002. [\[20\]](#) The battle actually took place from 22 September-26 October 1980, and was one of the first operational surprises of that long war. The Khorramshahr front was important due to the port at Abadan and the oil terminals in the vicinity. As the Humeini regime in Iran focused on its internal affairs and stabilization, Iraq's new President, Saddam Hussein, started to move on Iran. The initial objective of the Iraqi armed forces was to capture the Khusistan sectors population and control centers, which included the cities of Despol, Ahawaz, Shosh Abadan, Khorramshahr, and the oil infrastructure in the area.

Khorramshahr is a communications junction of roads and railways, most importantly controlling the road to the oil well in the city of Abadan. The city had 270,000 residents before the war, and is 7 km long and 6 km wide. Key objectives were the Shat-El-Arab port, the Dej barracks and prison area, and the radio transmitting station. Iran constructed a system of dikes as part of a comprehensive defensive system that included strong points. One dyke was 5 km from the next, offering some defense in depth. The second dyke had the majority of the tanks, artillery and antitank weapons. Iran's regular army, composed of some 7,000 men, was responsible for the city's external defense. Iraq used a division to attack composed of one armored and one mechanized brigade (organic) and one armored brigade (reinforcement). The 33rd Special Forces brigade was assigned a reserve role along with one Commando Battalion, and people's army units (a military of civilian volunteer members of the Ba'ath Party), Border Police forces, Police forces and Navy and Air Force support personnel participated. Members of the Presidential Guard Special Forces Battalion also participated, indicating Hussein's personal involvement. The plan was to do the fighting in phases: cross the border and reach the city outskirts; occupy the port and sound end of the city; occupy Dej barracks; and gain control over the residential area and disconnect the city from Abadan. The Iraqi's encircled the city on the north (Dej Barracks location) and south (port location) to disconnect it from Khusistan. The Iraqis took the dykes in a few days of fighting, and cleared the captured area instead of following the retreating Iranians. The Special Forces and Commando unit moved south to the port (which makes it appear that they were no longer in reserve as noted previously), and the armored brigade advanced toward Dej to the north. Other goals were to gain control over three bridges and disconnect the city from the roads leading to Abadan so that no supplies or reinforcements could reach the city. Iranian resistance was high since the Iraqis were now encountering the Iranian Revolution Guards. The attack began on 30 September and Iranians and Iraqis fought one another from close range, day and night, attacking and counterattacking. Eventually the Iraqis took control of the area of the city near the Belano bridge and then began to move south toward the port. Snipers caused many problems for the Iraqis as they moved south. In the Iraqi force were the Special Forces and Commando units reinforced by an armored battalion. Tank and artillery fire kept the Iranians on the run.

In the north, an attack was conducted against Dej Barracks, which served the Iranian army. The majority of the division, supported by a Special Forces element, conducted this attack at dawn on 12 October. The Iranians held out for a few days, as Iraqi leaflets and fire support appeared to have little effect. Then Iraqi engineers successfully breached the 2-meter high walls around the barracks, and Dej quickly fell into Iraqi hands. Now located in the north and the south, the

Special Forces slowly and cautiously entered the city from three sides to do battle with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Tactics involved taking a sector, clearing it and making it a solid base from which more forces could be deployed. To offset Iranian knowledge of the streets, and employment of fire and sniper support, the Iraqis attacked at night to advance troops and gain surprise, and placed observation points on tall buildings. Final objectives were the Government building where the Iranian headquarters was located, and the nearby bridge connecting the road from Khommashahr to Abadan. Fighting for possession of the bridge took 48 hours. The last Iraqi attack started at dawn on 24 October and lasted five hours. The city was cleared by 26 October. This completes the record of Iraqi use of force in Khommashahr.

The US plan to date is apparently to do whatever it takes to avoid fighting in the streets. Washington wants to leave enough of the military communications network intact so that the Iraqi military won't lose contact with the capital in case Hussein is captured or eliminated; and planners hope to spare as much of the armed forces as possible so that a stable force remains to enforce a post-Hussein regime. [21] There are many reasons for the US to avoid street fighting: it offsets US technological superiority in the open; it allows Hussein to use the density of cities (both structures and population) to obstruct an attacking force; and it forces any attacking force to closely review any use of long range fires for their potential to inflict civilian losses or risk turning the population "to the dark side," that is driving them to support Hussein at the risk of national survival. The Iraqi government does not concern itself with "friendly losses" like the US does. During the Iran-Iraq war, it is reported that 1.5 MILLION people were killed, wounded or captured.

Is successful MOUT in Iraq possible? It is, but this depends on the way the population responds to the presence of US or coalition troops. If the population turns against Hussein, anything is possible and MOUT becomes feasible. If they do not, US or coalition forces will be confronted with the worst kind of city fighting, that of not only the armed forces but also the people of Iraq. In a city such as Baghdad, where the population density is in the range of 17,000 people per square mile, it will not be possible to separate the good guys from the bad guys, and any invasion will most likely meet with little success. A recent (17 December) report from the *London Times* indicates that things might not be all that bad for US forces in Iraq. In a survey conducted by the International Crisis Group (ICG), it was reported that Iraqis would largely welcome a US-led attack and want stability, and political change. The ICG reportedly conducted dozens of covert interviews in the cities of Baghdad, Mosul, and Najaf to get its impressions. The bad news for the Bush Administration is that those interviewed reportedly were not happy with the news that exiles may be put in the place of Saddam Hussein to rule the country. Thus, in the final analysis, it remains very, very difficult to tell the tale of the tape of public opinion in Iraq, and on that fulcrum rests the potential success or failure of the operation.

Endnotes

[1] Hoseyn Ardestani, A Confrontation of Strategies, the Iran-Iraq War: The Effect of the Changes on the Battlefield in the Iran-Iraq War on the Policies of the Great Powers, Tehran: Advanced War Course, Culture and Military

Studies, 21 March 1999-20 March 2000, as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 18 May 2001.

[2] "Hussein Obsession Marked by Mosque," The Kansas City Star, 15 December 2002, p A24.

[3] Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Stones of Baghdad," New York Times, 4 October 2002.

> [4] Nicholas D. Kristof, "Fighting Street to Street," New York Times, 27 September 2002.

[5] Scott Peterson, "Iraq Prepares for Urban Warfare," Christian Science Monitor, 4 October 2002, pl 1.

[6] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Baghdad is Planning for Urban Warfare: Strategy Opposite of Gulf War Approach," Washington Post Foreign Service, 27 September 2002, p. A 1.

[7] Ibid., Peterson

[8] David Von Drehle, "Debate Over Iraq Focuses on Outcome: Multiple Scenarios Drive Questions about War," Washington Post, 7 October 2002, p. A 1.

[9] "Storming the Streets of Baghdad," Business Week, October 21 2002.

[10] Stephen Fidler and Peter Siegel, "The Battle of Baghdad: Is the US Ready to Wage War Street by Street?" Financial Times, 22 November 2002.

[11] Christopher Cooper, "Iraqi Forces Aren't Expected to Put up Much of a Fight," The Wall Street Journal, 13 November 2002.

[12] Fidler and Spiegel.

[13] Michael Elliott and Massimo Calabresi, "Inside the Secret Campaign to Topple Saddam," Time, 2 December 2002, p. 38.

[14] Entire paragraph provided by Dr. Jacob Kipp, 21 October 2002, while reviewing this synopsis.

[15] Discussion with Dr. Kipp, 21 October 2002.

[16] Discussion with Colonel Timothy Heinemann, Dean of Academics at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in November 2002.

[17] Point made by Mr. Les Grau while reviewing this article.

[18] Center for Army Lessons Learned home page.

[19] Ibid, Ardestani.

[20] This and the next three paragraphs are based on the article by Pesach Malovni entitled "The Iraqis Battle for Khorramshahr," IDF Journal, pp 74-85.

[21] Mark Thompson, "Going Door to Door," Time, 16 September 2002, pp 38, 39.